

CAN WE REMAIN YUP'IK IN THESE CONTEMPORARY TIMES?

A CONVERSATION OF THREE YUGTUN-SPEAKING MOTHERS

Presented to the Faculty  
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

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MASTER OF ARTS

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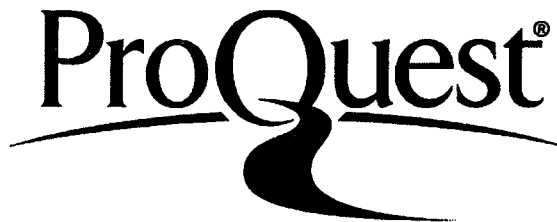
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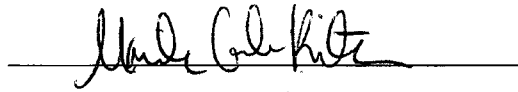
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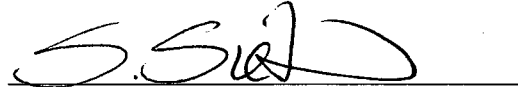
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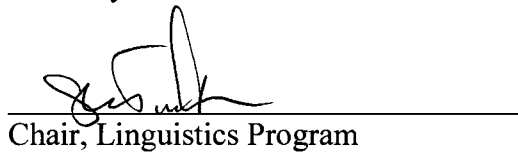
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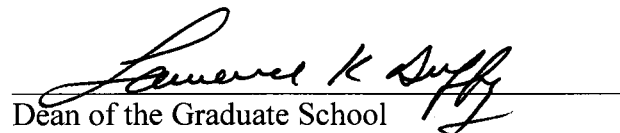


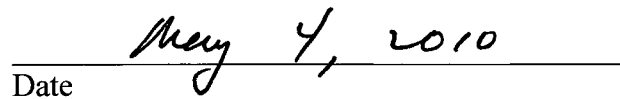
  
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### **Abstract**

The Yup'ik people of southwestern Alaska are experiencing language shift from Yugtun to English. This study is a conversation between three Yugtun speaking mothers who are trying to understand this shift and wondering if they can maintain their identity, and that of their children, in this changing world. The study takes place in the village of Kuiggluk. Data collection included a research journal and focus group discussions.

In this study, I have tried to paint a picture of who we are as Yup'ik mothers in our contemporary lives. Qayaruaq, Mikngayaq and I carry with us our own mothers' teachings, while at the same time we face different situations in school and schooling. Through our discussions we sought to understand the reasons for language loss/shift – a shift that seems to be driving us away from our culture.

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Cali quyavikanka: angayuqaagka Kuigglugmi, aanaullgutegka Qayaruankuk Mikngayaq-llu, SLATE-ami arnaruugaat elitnaullgutkenka, irniagka Alek'ankuk (Tochagg) Caligauq-llu. Aatakek-llu Xiyole'-q quyavikaqa taqsuqutekeksaunii kiikiirturlua taugaam pillruamia. Ukut wanigg' pugtellrenka nangyuilngurmek quyavikanka.

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## **Chapter 1 : Introduction**

As I was growing up I would often spend time at my grandparents' house and would occasionally spend nights with them. They lived within walking distance of our homes and because we spent a lot of time with them, they became in essence, an extension of our parents. On one of those nights, I was working on my geometry homework lying belly down on the bed. As I was writing away, my grandfather sat gently beside me and I felt his hand lightly on the top of my head and down along my hair. I thought he needed me to do something so I glanced back. He just sat there and smiled, not to me, but more to himself. He got up and left, softly humming a tune. I shrugged it off and went back to my work. Today, it makes me wonder. Did he smile because he was happy that I knew enough English to decipher and do the homework on my own? (I knew he wasn't able to help me with it.) Was he happy because I was at home and not at some boarding school and he was able to reach out to me? Or was he able to see beyond all that and was smiling because he knew I was bound for something much more? Whatever the reason might have been, I will never know. But I do like to think that he's smiling right now at those who continue to teach one another through new stories we tell today, such as this.

### **The researcher as researched**

There are many reasons why I've included myself in this research. I am Yup'ik Eskimo from the village of Kuiggluk and consider myself fairly bilingual. I graduated from Kuiggluk high school in 1988 after which I went to the University of Alaska in

Fairbanks where I pursued my elementary teaching degree. My first year teaching was spent in the village of Cevvaarneq where I taught third and fourth grade English. I struggled as any first year teacher would and requested to transfer to another school closer to Kuiggluk where I could easily visit home. The year after, I taught in Akula Elitnaurvik in the village of Kassigluk. I taught Yugtun to third graders. I oversaw grades K-2 in Akula since there were no certified teachers for those grade levels. Almost all of the children spoke Yugtun and all were taught largely in Yugtun through third grade. In the transitional grade called 3T, the students were taught in English as they were transitioning from Yugtun to English. During the three years that I was in Kassigluk, I came to understand the importance of teaching Yugtun.

Mid-school year of 1997, I moved to Bethel to be the fourth grade material developer for Ayaprun Elitnaurvik (AE), a K-6 Yup'ik immersion school. The following school year, I taught fourth grade using the material that I had helped create. It was during this time that I came to wholly appreciate our language. I understood the importance of using the Yugtun language, but never internalized it. I also realized that our language use was declining in Bethel (which was why the school was created) and in Kuiggluk as well (where most everyone's first language was Yugtun). More and more there were discussions of language loss among educators, with elders and parents, and in the newspapers.

While in AE, we held summer teacher training sessions, took classes for our credentials and discussed ways to improve teaching methods. In the 2005 summer session, I had the opportunity to take a language policy and planning class with an

instructor from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He brought to light the questions of language use that I did not know we had. We discussed topics such as who the individuals were who created language and education policy at the federal, state and school district levels, what determined those policies and how they affected us as Yugtun language learners and teachers. It was the most powerful class I had ever taken because before then, I had never thought to defend my deceased grandparents' right to use Yugtun. What started to emerge from those discussions within myself was the voice my grandparents and parents so desperately needed during the time that they were punished for speaking Yugtun in class. It was the voice that said, "Who I am, with the Yugtun language that I speak is just as important as who you are, with the English language that you speak." More and more I was questioning and wondering how our language situation became what it is now and how it might continue to evolve because of what we were doing.

When the opportunity came to earn an M.A. through the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Second Language Acquisition Teacher Education (SLATE) project, many teachers in AE were reluctant to apply because our workloads as teachers were already overwhelming. During submission time, a Yup'ik instructor and PhD student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) phoned asking why AE teachers hadn't applied. We were reminded of the important impact we could have with such an opportunity and were convinced to submit our applications. Myself, along with two other AE teachers were accepted into the program.

After our initial SLATE summer class in 2007, I was convinced, excited and scared to take on this research subject because it “researched” who I was. I couldn’t think of another subject more meaningful than looking to one’s own self. I prayed that what I wrote would influence young Yup’ik people to continue to find ways to maintain our language and to strengthen our Yup’ik identities. The other students involved in the SLATE program also had similar convictions and together, with the help of our professors, it was time to do it ourselves, in our own voices for each other.

### **Research questions**

It was difficult to pinpoint a specific research question due to the nature of my study. I wanted to explore the issue of language shift/loss in my community. I wanted to see what other community members thought and wanted to understand why our language was shifting at such a rapid rate. To answer these questions I decided to focus on the thoughts and experiences of three Yugtun-speaking mothers: Qayaruaq, Mikngayaq and Atan (me). As is the nature of qualitative research, what developed were more questions than answers. As a group, we decided to focus on two general questions: (a) How will our children grow-up as good Yup’ik people if they don’t know how to speak and don’t know how to carry on our way of life?; and (b) How do we as mothers help our children live a good Yup’ik life? Both of these questions were inclusive of language and culture, and mother and child and felt like a good start. It was after I got my data, and after extensive analysis with my professors, that I formulated the question: Can we remain Yup’ik and keep our language and identity strong for our own children in an English

dominated world? The question was derived from the data and did not come previously as is often the nature of qualitative research.

### **SLATE: A personal journey**

The journey that I have taken through the Second Language Acquisition Teacher Education (SLATE) master's program has been phenomenal. When I applied for SLATE, I was told that I could write my personal essay in Yugtun if I chose. This was both confusing and wonderful. It was confusing because I was never asked to use my language for any college work, except for Yugtun language classes for credit. It was wonderful because I was finally given permission to do so. But I was still skeptical. I wrote about my interest in looking at our Yugtun language and how I could help find more authentic ways to teach Yugtun reading and writing because these subjects and their assessments were translated versions of English. They were not Yugtun in content at all. In addition, I wanted to maintain our Yugtun language and culture and a master's degree would allow me better access to talk to other teachers in formal settings such as teacher in-services and conferences.

When we first got together in the classroom at the university I vividly remember our professors talking about the expectations and timelines for the program. One thing confused me as I listened and it was the discussion on change they seemed to dance around. I couldn't believe what I was hearing so I asked the question, "Do you mean to tell me that we are in the position of changing the way the university conducts its classes?" Inviting me to use my language in the initial entrance examinations was not just an enticing ploy to get me applied, it was the way in which we would conduct our

discussions as focus was placed on indigenous languages, cultures and school. I knew the program was going to be completely different than my previous college experience.

Throughout the program, we had emotion-filled discussions on second language acquisition that involved many forms of inequality toward Native people. We read articles on other indigenous peoples' struggles that mirrored our own and learned about laws that govern assessment in schools today. In our discussions I felt the presence of our ancestors, and not only my own but those of Hawaiian, Maori and Navajo descent that made our classes powerful and emotional. We cried, showed our anger (as our grandparents and parents couldn't) and told one another how incredible we were to be in pivotal position of change. No one at the university, where we were taught from a majority of white professors, had ever expanded our minds by including and utilizing our heritage knowledge. Up until then, I thought expansion of our traditional knowledge only came from grandparents in small villages. It was unbelievable that the university was allowing me to express who I truly was in a university setting.

During the third and last summer of the program, I experienced another first. It was when I was allowed to write my mid-term exam in Yugtun. In class we had two teachers, one English speaker and one Yugtun speaker. During our class discussions, we were allowed to switch languages whenever we chose to express ourselves most meaningfully without being interrupted or cut-off by translations. When it came time for our mid-term, we were told we could write it in Yugtun if we chose. I was amazed. I wondered what my grandfather would have said as I imagined him sitting by me. I smiled and thought he probably would have shockingly asked, "What are you doing?!" as

it would have suggested he had raised a disrespectful and defiant child. I handed in my paper with a sense of redemption.

When I began to strategize my study and began to develop research questions, I was amazed yet again because I was told that I could conduct my “research” in a way that was comfortable and natural for me. It started with my telling Qayaruaq (one of the mothers in the study) about my uneasiness involving her knowing that I would be the only one to get a degree. I explained to her that this was no ordinary “research” because we had never conducted research of ourselves by ourselves. I admitted that it was all new and slightly strange. She told me not to worry because she knew who I was and she knew I wasn’t in the program for money or fame. She understood that we were helping each other understand language loss to in turn help our community. It was not for personal gain for either of us. I fully disclosed my feelings right from the start relieved that I even could. I saw no other way in which to begin the research without Qayaruaq’s and Mikngayaq’s full consent and understanding of what we were about to undertake. Our sense of responsibility drove us through the uncomfortable aspects and previous knowledge of what traditional “research” was. We were there for change, as was expected of us.



## **Chapter 2 : Our Schooling History**

The story of Alaska Native education reflects many other stories told by other indigenous people around the world, including the Inuit of Canada, the Navajo and Hopi of the lower 48, the Hawai'ians of the Pacific Islands, the Maori of New Zealand and many others. Many of us reflect back to our grandparents and their initial experiences of school. It is in the school building itself that, for many of us, the sad and trying story of our struggle to take back what was taken from us (our heritage languages, our traditional customs, our identities) began. As Lomawaima and McCarty (2002) explain, none of our grandparents chose to learn English; the choice was made for them. This is not to say that the story ends on a sad note, or even that it ends at all. It continues forward as each generation picks up where another has left off. Good stories are told and re-told and as our grandparents would ask, as we must now ask, "So tell me, what have you learned?"

This is where we (Qayaruaq, Mikngayaq and Atan) pick up the story. We believe that we do not exist separate and cut-off from our grandparents and parents and in order for others to understand us further, it is important to retell the history of our schooling. Through these events, this is who we are, who we have become and why we ask if we can remain Yup'ik.

The history of Indigenous education in the United States, according to Lomawaima and McCarty (2002) is a history of "Americanization". They explain that schooling for indigenous groups can be seen as "a grand experiment in standardization" (p. 282). Schools were built in our small villages so that we could achieve the "American Dream": learn English, find a good paying job, support our families and our indulgences.

Historically, western educators did not consider the “good life” the indigenous people already had (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 1999, pp. 29-31). Much of what constituted a “good life” for the people in Kuiggluk was/is really no different than any other indigenous group. A “good life” is largely based on the continual balance of our spirituality that promotes the well being of our community and not defined by personal riches or possessions as some might think. Like the indigenous Kwara’ae, a good Yup’ik life is one where we are rooted in our traditions and values (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 1999, p. 31). A good life is community based, not individually driven. Our Yup’ik culture, before the onslaught of outsiders, was complete with our own form of education largely based on our subsistence seasons. We worked with one another to provide food and shelter and our spirituality included the land, plants, and animals (Kawagley, 1995). As Whitely (2003) stated, we did not need to compare ourselves with the rest of the world because we were already complete for ourselves (p. 712).

From its beginnings in the 1930s, and despite the birth of Bilingual Education, the growth of local high schools, and the desire to leave no child behind, the history of indigenous education in Southwestern Alaska has been a history of subtractive bilingualism, where a second language replaces the first. Sadly this is often achieved through force and pressure (Baker, 2006, p. 74). We know from conversations with our grandparents and parents how they were physically punished by white teachers for speaking Yugtun in class, and forced to learn English. It was through this method that the English language slowly replaced our own just like many other indigenous languages around the world (Wong Fillmore, 1991).

Our Yugtun language was not welcomed in classrooms when our grandparents and parents went to school and teachers rarely sought to get to know our way of life. In Kuiggluk, our grandparents lived in small one-room cabins with no running water or flushing toilets. Many of our grandparents and parents wore traditional clothing of fur parkas and boots. Many of them spoke in our language, described by at least some outsiders as “guttural noise”. Some of us sang traditional songs and even danced. Like many other indigenous people, we were not understood. The missionaries and teachers that came believed us to be in need of help; we were seen as strange and backward (Alton, 1998).

The era in which our grandparents first began formal schooling in school buildings was an era in which key words like, “Americanization” and “assimilation” dominated and established English-only educational policy. Schools sought to infuse students with an American identity and a strong sense of nationalism (Crawford, 2004). Congress wrote in 1819 that schools should be established “...for the purpose of providing against the further decline and final extinction of the Indian tribes...and for introducing among them the habits and arts of civilization” (Alton, 1998, p. 5). One tool used to achieve these goals was public punishment. As Alton (1998) tells us, around 1895 a teacher in Douglas reported using a “heroic remedy” which was a mixture of myrrh, a bitter substance and capsicum, a hot substance. The “remedy” was used to sponge out mouths of indigenous students using their language in the classroom

[The purpose was] to take away the taint of the Indian language! One application usually was sufficient, but one or two cases had to receive a second application.

From that time on...their studies was almost doubly rapid for they dared not talk their own language. (p. 16)

We would like to believe these things are part of a long dead past. Sadly my mother reflecting back to her own schooling, spoke of a student who would faint in class because she was so fearful of the teacher and was hit with a ruler whenever she took too long to respond. She couldn't understand the teacher. No one understood the teacher. They were especially scared when they were asked to read aloud in front of everyone. To avoid being punished, my mother and her peers would get together after class to teach one another English words to answer the teacher. Whoever figured out certain words would teach the rest of the group and they basically survived school the way they were taught to survive anything, by helping one another.

Many of these methods remind us of the cruelty endured by our grandparents and parents. There is no denying that our grandparents and parents learned quickly that to speak in Yugtun was bad and wrong. With little choice and backed up by United States policies, schools used one language, English, and one educational model, the western model (Crawford, 2004). Educating students this way was what Baker (2006) referred to as "submersion" and adds, "[s]tudents will either sink, struggle or swim" (p. 216). This was rightly said. Some of our people sank and dropped out of school altogether, many of them struggled and endured the pain and humiliation while others were quicker to adjust and to swim. For many indigenous people, language was not the only thing they lost, but with it, their self-esteem and self-worth (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002).

**The bilingual education era**

Bilingual education was yet another form of subtractive bilingualism even though the method included the indigenous language. This might have been the best way to eradicate indigenous languages. This era marked the end of corporal punishment in the classrooms and segregation was no longer accepted (Crawford, 2004). The idea to include our indigenous languages to teach the English language was simple enough, but it was still just that, to teach English.

Bilingual education in Alaska began in the early 1970s (Marlow, 2004), shortly before Qayaruaq, Mikngayaq and I began school. As students, we were encouraged to speak Yugtun and communicated with our teachers with the help of Yup'ik teacher aides. We were taught to read and write in Yugtun, which was the case for many other indigenous groups in the nation (Beaulieu, 2008). Unlike our grandparents and parents, we were very comfortable and enjoyed going to school. But again using our language to deliver the content was the way many of us, and many other indigenous languages rapidly transitioned to English (Wong Fillmore, 1991).

**The rise of high schools**

Up until 1976, there were no high schools in our villages and our older siblings were sent to boarding schools miles away to places like Mt. Edgecumbe in southeastern Alaska (Cotton, 1984). In 1976, a decree most commonly known as the “Molly Hootch Case” helped set-up village high schools in Alaska. Molly Hootch was a 16 year old girl from the village of Emmonak. She and 27 other plaintiffs filed a class action suit with the help of lawyer Christopher Cooke (Cotton, 1984). After years of litigation and

negotiation, including a title change to *Tobeluk v. Lind*, the Tobeluk Consent Decree brought high schools to rural Alaska. Although students no longer left our villages to go to school, the same “bilingual” model of education continued. High schools were still controlled by the state and federal governments who continued to produce teaching and testing material in English. This in effect left the Native language and knowledge out of learning environments (Beaulieu, 2008).

Qayaruaq, Mikngayaq and I were fortunate enough to stay in the village of Kuiggluk to complete high school. It is interesting to note that Cotton (1984) concluded his report by wondering how the new high schoolers would be “markedly different” to those who left the village, and if they would learn and appreciate traditional values and skills (n.p). We believe that because we were the first generation not forced to leave our communities to go to school elsewhere, we are in a unique position. We can see the point of view of those who left before us and those who stayed after. Being in the middle, we can see the positive changes, like more Yup’ik educators, but we can also see that we are still losing the Yugtun language and way of life.

### **Leave no child behind**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) is yet another agent of subtractive bilingualism in local schools (Wyman, 2009). Even though the name gives us the sense that our children will not be forgotten or “left behind”, the policy continues to eliminate Native language and culture (Beaulieu, 2008; Patrick, 2008). There are two ways that this is done: assessment (Nelson-Barber & Trumbull, 2007) and funding (Crawford, 2004). Under NCLB, schools are graded according to the standardized tests in English

for grades 3, 6, and 8 as well as high school exiting exams for all public schools (Patrick, 2008). This means in order for our schools to remain open, our students need to score at least 70% on the national level of “proficiency” in reading, writing and mathematics all of which are administered in English. NCLB does not take into account that our children are given the test in English even though in Kuiggluk they are taught through the Yugtun language from kindergarten to third grade.

In our school district, the Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD), “[m]eeting the No Child Left Behind requirements at the cost of [our] heritage seems to be a price some families and communities are willing to pay” (Williams & Rearden, 2006, p. 37). If the standards are not met within our schools, many fear our schools will be closed and our students uprooted. Such actions, real or imagined, defeat the intent of the Molly Hootch case.

We, the mothers in this study, are left to ask other questions: How do we make sure our children continue to be schooled where we can watch them grow in our language? How can we implement additional programs and/or modify existing programs to include our traditional knowledge in the school system? How can we remain Yup’ik in these contemporary times?

## **Chapter 3 : Methodology**

### **Theoretical framework**

This is a qualitative study that combines elements of ethnography, autoethnography and action research. Qualitative research takes place in a natural setting, takes from an emic point of view and does not look for specific answers or solutions (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Spradly (1979) defines ethnography as a useful tool for understanding how people see their experience (p. iv). Mackey and Gass (2005) see ethnography as a focus on cultural patterns of a group and stress “the importance of situating the study within the larger sociocultural context...” (p.168).

In this study, I have tried to paint a picture of who we are as Yup'ik mothers in our contemporary lives. Qayaruaq, Mikngayaq and I carry with us our own mothers' teachings, while at the same time we face different situations in school and schooling. Through our discussions we sought to understand the reasons for language loss/shift – a shift that seems to be driving us away from our culture.

Autoethnography is closely related to ethnography. It documents a culture through the perspective of the author/researcher. Wall (2006) explains that in using autoethnography, the researcher/author allows others to see his or her point of view. As both a researcher and a participant in the study, it made sense to use autoethnography. Further, autoethnography fits well with the Yup'ik way of doing things. As Yup'ik people, we share and talk by bringing in our own personal experiences. We normally don't speak of things we aren't familiar with, or things that are disconnected to us



physically, emotionally and/or spiritually. In as much as I wanted to hear from the other mothers, I wanted to also share and include my own views. I did not want to generalize and explain my thoughts as theirs (or theirs as mine). Through autoethnography I found the room to share my point of view, my journey directly with the reader. I was able to step away and formulate and discuss my own thoughts as an individual.

Using action research made sense in my study. Stone (2008) explains, unlike applied research where the practitioner takes observations from the lab into the real-world setting, "...action research treats the real world *as* a 'lab'" (p. 88). Action research is part of our daily lives as Yup'ik people. Action research is a cyclical process of plan-act-observe-reflect (Stone, 2008, pp. 89-90). Action researchers see themselves in a continual cycle of learning and re-learning but always moving forward. When addressing real world problems the researcher "becomes directly involved in the research process as a change agent, devoted not only to studying organizations and processes but also to improving them" (Gray, 2004, as cited in Stone, 2008, p. 87). Through this research, we hope to make changes ourselves so that our children can maintain our language. If we don't, we are faced with the possibility of language death. As some believe, without the rich Yugtun language that we use to describe our animals, plants, land, all of which include our traditions, we lose our strong connections to them and to ourselves as Yup'ik people.

### **Data collection procedures**

Data collection included a research journal and focus group discussions. I kept a weekly journal. In it I wrote about my own personal experiences at home with my

children. I wrote about the challenges I faced using Yugtun at home. It was also a place to record my on-going reflections on the discussions I had with Qayaruaq and Mikngayaq. In addition to writing about the problems I was facing, I also explored possible solutions to problems I faced in passing on Yugtun language and culture and how I might use Yugtun more at home and in my life.

The focus groups consisted of three mothers, Qayaruaq, Mikngayaq and myself (Atan) (see The participants below). All three graduated from Kuiggluk High school in 1988. The initial focus group discussion was conducted in the fall of 2008 with six more discussions between November and April. The group met on Saturdays because each of the mothers worked during the week. The discussion sessions lasted one to two hours each. The initial discussion included only Qayaruaq and myself because Mikngayaq could not be reached at the time. I asked Qayaruaq where she wanted to be interviewed and we both agreed that the school would be a good place because there would be no distractions from family members and/or children after school hours.

When Qayaruaq agreed to talk to me, I explained the purpose of my study and asked if she would be willing to be audio-recorded. She agreed, signed the adult consent form and we began our discussions. Qayaruaq understood and felt comfortable with the discussion process because she was already involved in similar discussions taking place in the community. Qayaruaq is one of the group leaders in the community discussing the language situation and community goals for the Yugtun language. I initiated the discussion with her talking about using the Yugtun language at home. After our initial meeting, we jotted down topics that we would continue with the next time. After each

focus group discussion, we followed with additional topics we would like to talk about the next time we were to get together. Our topics included using the language at home with our own children and using the language in school and in the community.

After two discussions, Mikngayaq, was able to join us. Qayaruaq and I updated her on what we had discussed. I felt at first that she was influenced by the discussions Qayaruaq and I shared but she was able to add to our conversations also. She shared her views on language use at home as well as talking about our culture and her experiences as a child. She also spoke about her family's involvement in hunting and fishing.

Weather conditions, scheduling and timing were all factors for setting up and conducting the discussions.

### **The setting**

The Yup'ik village of Kuiggluk is located in southwestern Alaska about 80 miles east of the Bering Sea and 17 miles from Bethel on the Kuskokwim River. There are approximately 1,000 people living in the village. Because there are no roads between villages in the region, transportation is by airplane and boat in the summer and snow machine and car in the winter. The supplies that are brought in for the local stores are shipped by airplanes or by hovercraft.

Although Kuiggluk has two grocery stores, the majority of the people still maintain a subsistence lifestyle. In the short summer months between June and August king salmon, dog salmon, red salmon and silver salmon are cut and smoked for the long winters. Almost all of the salmon parts from head to tail are prepared and preserved.

Other fish are also caught and prepared such as smelt, shee fish, burbot and white fish.

Between October and February, pike, lush fish and black fish are caught.

Besides fish, during the summer months plants such as wild rhubarb and sour dock are collected for consumption and stink weed and fir needles for medicinal purposes. Salmonberries, blueberries, crowberries, cranberries, bog berries, rose hips, nagoon berries and high bush cranberries are picked in the summer months.

Big game is also hunted throughout the seasons such as moose, caribou and bear as well as smaller game such as muskrats, beavers, river otters and porcupine. There are many different species of bird that are hunted in the spring and fall such as many varieties of ducks and geese, swans and cranes.

Because the gathering of plants and the hunting of animals play an important role in the lives of the people, much respect is paid them and to the land. Kawagley (1995) says that the balance of nature is of utmost importance to the Yup'ik people. The concept of "interconnectedness of all things in the universe" is central in the Yup'ik worldview (p. 15). According to that worldview, the physical, emotional and spiritual worlds are all connected. What this means is that people are connected to the land, to the animals, to the plants and to the spirits that inhabit each. Creating disharmony, such as not taking care of plants and animals properly and in a timely manner, invites bad luck. For instance, if caribou meat is left to rot, then the family will be denied a good hunt in the future. The plants and animals are believed to know whether they will be taken care of and they will not "give" themselves to anyone who will not take care of them properly.

### **The participants**

The participants in the study include Qayaruaq, Mikngayaq and Atan. Qayaruaq has three school-aged children, 17, 16, and 12 years of age. She is married to a Yugtun speaking Yup'ik man. Qayaruaq works in the school as a Yup'ik immersion teacher and strongly believes in maintaining and passing on the language. Qayaruaq's husband practices the subsistence lifestyle by hunting and fishing while she works to pay bills. Qayaruaq feels her daughter is fairly strong in the Yup'ik language. She believes her eldest son struggles with the language and believes her youngest son is balanced in both languages.

The second mother, Mikngayaq has five children altogether, four of whom go to school. They are 17, 15, 9, 6 and 2 years of age. She works for the tribal government of Kuiggluk and substitutes for teachers at the school when needed. She is married to a Korean man who doesn't speak Yugtun, but is bilingual in both English and Korean. As a family, they engage in subsistence activities. Mikngayaq's children speak Yugtun mainly to their grandparents when they visit them up the road from where they reside. Her children understand Yugtun more than they speak and when they do speak they mispronounce words or phrases, but are pretty understandable. They speak to their father in English, but generally they are encouraged to use Yugtun at home.

I am the last mother in the study. I have two children aged 7 and 4. This year, 2010, my son is in first grade and my daughter attends pre-school. Before taking a year off to finish my thesis, I taught third and fourth grade in Bethel at our Yup'ik immersion school, Ayaprun Elitnaurvik (AE). I have worked as an elementary teacher for 14 years

with 10 in AE. My partner Dan is Athabascan Indian. He speaks English. My children are English first language speakers, and my son understands more when spoken to in Yugtun than my daughter.

### **Code switching**

The language that forms the data for this study is a mixture of Yugtun and English. Switching a word or a phrase from English to Yugtun and vice versa is called code switching (CS). Even though we tell others (and ourselves) that we are bilingual, we understand that bilingualism is a matter of degree. That is to say that if we compare our Yugtun to that of our grandparents, they of course have a higher level of usage and comprehension. Similarly, if we compare our English with that of our professors, they have a higher level of English usage and comprehension. Yet, it is empowering for us to use both Yugtun and English languages. Whenever we need help expressing ourselves in one language or the other, we are able to draw from both.

If we were to conduct our discussions in only one language (English or Yugtun), we could do it but it would not come out as our true selves. There are some ideas expressed more accurately in Yugtun and others in English. One of the benefits of qualitative research is the use of a natural setting. CS allowed us to speak to each other naturally as we would in everyday conversations. Some might view CS as an indication of language loss. That would be a correct observation in some circumstances, but not this one. The more balanced a bilingual person is, the more complex the code switching becomes (Hale, 1995, p. 16). This is not to excuse our group by any means, but this is

the way in which we were most honest with each other. We know that no one particular group is at fault for our Yugtun language decline. It is all of us.

### **Data analysis**

I transcribed the focus group discussions and then read them looking for themes. I did not approach the transcripts with predefined questions or themes, but allowed the themes to emerge from the data itself. I looked for connections of similar thoughts and ideas and eventually identified five major themes. They were: realization, awareness, generations, decline of language and language and culture. Initially when I wrote about the themes themselves, the writing lost the essence and feeling of the original conversations. As I was thinking of a way to re-organize the themes, a conversation with one of my participants came back to me. She used the metaphor of a windowpane to describe how we (the three mothers in this study) were able to see the attitudes of parents who left the village to go to school and to those who stayed. She saw us in the middle able to look both ways through the glass. I took her vision, and with the help of one of my professors, used the metaphor of being in the middle to reorganize my original themes. From this vantage point, in the middle, I attempted to describe what we as mothers see, hear and feel about language shift and cultural loss. I took the themes I had identified and weaved them into what our senses were telling us about the situation we face. The theme of awareness became the discussions *In the midst of decline* and *We feel responsibility*. Both represent our awareness of our current situation in that we know we are in the midst of decline and feel responsible for sharing our awareness with others. We understand our own level of awareness and need to make sure that we guide others

toward that understanding. Awareness and realization together became *What our senses and worlds tell us*. These discussions dealt with our own formation of knowledge and awareness that language change occurs over time. Generations became *We hear a different “Yup’ik” person*. As new generations are born, we heard a different definition of being “Yup’ik” from our own. Decline became *We hear improper forms of language*. This became one of the more visible forms of language loss and shift. Because we were hearing improper forms of Yugtun (and English) we knew we were heading in a direction that put us further away from being Yup’ik.



## **Chapter 4 : Epistemology, Our Knowledge**

Nick Thompson in Brayboy and Maughan (in press) talks of stories. He said stories develop when you reflect upon your life. A good story hits you like an arrow. It makes you think. It makes you wonder, “Why did my grandfather tell me that story? What is it about myself that I need to change in order to learn from the lesson brought before me?” A story weakens your defenses and the power of the story starts to develop in you. When a story makes you feel “...like you are sick...That story is working on you... You keep thinking about it” (p. 28). The answers to our questions that have developed about school, our language and culture and our children interconnect at a critical point: our Yup’ik epistemology. It’s as though we have been hit with an arrow that has led us to where we can begin to answer our question of whether or not we can remain Yup’ik while we succeed in today’s job market and economy.

### **What it is and isn’t**

What is epistemology? Epistemology is difficult to define. Epistemology is always changing just as our stories change with each generation. Webster’s dictionary defines it as though its fixed in one spot: “the theory of knowledge”. But epistemology is an active entity that continually changes and evolves. An epistemology is not merely conceptual, but narrative, it is a story that changes with the telling (Brayboy & Maughan, n.d., pp. 19-20).

When Meyer (2001), defined Hawaiian epistemology, she captured what it meant for Yup’ik people also:

Hawaiian epistemology is a long term idea that is both ancient and modern, central and marginalized. It is a distinct feature of our culture that cannot easily be distinguished from the fabric it is sewn into. It shifts, it is metamorphosed, it is changed by time and influence. It is constant. (p. 126)

Since our knowledge is passed down throughout the generations, the lessons and teachings are far older than our grandparents. They are constant, as Meyer (2001) explains, even though our environment might look differently than in our grandparents' time. Western ideologies have made it so that we think of indigenous ways and language as "old" and the western ways as "new" (King, 1999). As a result, some people might wonder; "Why do you want to go back to how our ancestors lived?" We don't. We don't want to live in sod houses and to throw out our computers. What we do want cannot be labeled as "old" and "new". We want to continue to teach to our children our traditional ways of knowing. We want our schools to incorporate this fundamental aspect of who we are, a fundamental that doesn't change regardless of change around us, into our educational system (Kawagley, 1995).

Our epistemology is made up of many themes and so it would be impossible to encompass the entirety of the Yup'ik way of life on several pages from one person. I will only touch on four here: awareness of self and others, spirituality and nature, the importance of community, and our elders as teachers. It is my hope that in discussing these aspects of Yup'ik epistemology, I highlight that which is not yet understood about us as Yup'ik people. For those of us who do understand these things, may we only be reminded.

### **Awareness of self and others**

Throughout the conversations with the mothers, there are references to two Yup'ik verb prefixes *elpeg-* and *ella-*. The first translates loosely as “inside oneself” and is indicative of the self and the five senses. The second translates loosely as “outside of self” and is more indicative of awareness of our surroundings. Both of these verb prefixes are important because they mark the formation of knowledge.

The first verb prefix *elpeg-* has more to do with self than our surroundings. As Meyer (2001) explains, when we feel something the very first time, we need to pay attention to it to see if it leads us anywhere (p. 134). We keep our bodies still during that moment and use our internal senses to figure out what we are meant to learn externally. When we gain sensation, it can be as quick as a gasp because we forgot something that needs urgent attention or it can expand slowly like when we sense that something is not right. Such is the realization we are facing now with language loss. That is, we have gained *elpeg-* because the bigger issue of losing identity is slowly becoming a reality and we need to work back, think back to how we have found ourselves in this situation. If we don't address the situation and work toward solutions, then we're realizing that what we fear, the loss of language and culture might actually occur.

*Ellarpak*, a word formed with the prefix form of *ella-*, literally means ‘the big world’. It refers to the first moment when one becomes aware of one's surroundings. This moment is described as “...the first photo clip of a person's consciousness...” (John, forthcoming, p. 1). As children, certain events become permanently imprinted in our memory and form the base of our knowledge. This is not to say that we learn from every

flash of memory, but that when we are given certain photo clips of ourselves they most likely have lessons to learn from whether we learn them at that moment or later on in our lives. We all know that as children, our memories are short, but as adults we gain more vivid and longer memories, referred to as *ellaturiinaarluta*, as we continue to internalize and apply what we have learned.

Both Kawagley (1995) and John (forthcoming) discuss the prefix *ella-*. Kawagley explains that *ella-* appears in a variety of words and functions including, “weather, awareness, world, creative force or god, universe and sky” (p. 15). Without this external world, we have no awareness. John (forthcoming) takes it a step further and adds that the root word *ella-* also describes how one looks at oneself: I am becoming aware of “X”, I am trying to become aware of “X”, and I have acquired awareness of “X” (p. 18). In the current study, we the mothers ask ourselves, have we gained enough awareness within ourselves, so that we are in a position to guide others? And at the same time, if people are not aware of what is happening in our homes and schools with our language, how do we facilitate the awareness of others in a meaningful and respectful way?

## **Community**

Thinking is also having others tell you what they think.

(Abraham Piianaia, Hawaiian elder from Meyer 2001)

Many Indigenous people value the well being of the community. For Yup'ik people, our communities help shape our knowledge and, like other indigenous groups, we cannot make ourselves happy when we see that others are not (Meyer, 2001). When a

family member is in trouble, community members become involved in one way or another and help comes in the form of encouragement and guidance, reprimand and reminders (John, forthcoming). We all learn from each other and because we individually experience life within our own private thoughts and actions, when we come across a troubling situation, we are best helped by someone who has experienced similar situations to help guide us through (Meyer, p. 125).

In our community of Kuiggluk (like many others in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta) names are an important part of who and what we are. Names are passed down to newborns when a member of a community (or another) has died. In receiving the name of the deceased person, you are automatically adopted into the family. Not only are you “family” to those of your biological parents, but of your namesake as well. The family members of your namesake treat you as if you still exist as that person, whether you take on the actions of your namesake or amusingly, the exact opposite. You are given gifts and receive special treatment because it is believed you continue the life of the person. In a community, you are not a stranger. We belong to one another and are responsible for the well being of each other. As mothers in the study, we feel that responsibility to act for the well being of all.

### **Nature and spirituality**

Many indigenous people believe that all living things are spiritual beings (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; John, forthcoming; Kawagley, 1995; Meyer, 2001). Living things include plants, animals, birds, and fish. Kawagley (1995) interprets the “Yupiaq” worldview as connecting the natural, spiritual, and human realms (p. 16). John

(forthcoming) expresses a similar worldview when she emphasizes the overlap of *ellam yua* or creator, the universe, human and non-human, which include animals, birds, fish and supernatural beings (pp. 5-6). Both interpretations are meant to be inclusive of what is seen and not seen and from which all need order. If as humans, we show disrespect of the land and animals by littering or wasting meat for example, we invite chaos and disorder (Kawagley, 1995).

Both Kawagley and John talk about an important aspect of Yup'ik epistemology, which is referred to as *nuna mamkitellran* literally translated 'when the earth was thin'. This was the time when humans and spirits were free to roam from one realm to another to guide and help each other. Now our elders tell us that if we do not honor our original teachings through our actions and thoughts, we invite chaos through the negative feelings we create. When we don't try to help one another, we cut-off the other connecting realms of our spirituality and in habitually doing so, have thickened the earth. As Kawagley states:

All of life is considered recyclable and therefore requires certain ways of caring in order to maintain the cycle. Native people cannot put themselves above other living things because we were all created by Raven, and all are considered an essential component of the universe. (p. 9)

As human beings, we might have more advanced brains, but that does not by any means make us "better" or "smarter" than the spirits of our plants, birds, fish and animals. If we are to truly exist as Yup'ik people, we won't put ourselves above anyone else, human or non-human. Who we are as Yup'ik people through our epistemology conflicts

with the concept of school and schooling where we are taught to individually learn and compete. The knowledge we learn from the lessons of our epistemology comes before success, and not the other way around.

### **Our elders, our teachers**

When an elder dies, a library burns. (Cochran 2008)

In the Yup'ik worldview, knowledge is taught and learned from our parents and elders who we revere and who we strive to become. In order to reach the status of “elder” and/or “teacher” you have to have awareness of who you are in relation to everyone else and to understand and respect the concepts of spirituality and nature. In other words, you have to have lived what you are sharing (John, forthcoming; Kawagley, 1995; Meyer, 2001). Our elders talk to us when they feel it is time to do so, when we have experienced enough to understand what is about to be said. Other teachings include daily reminders that help shape us for the next lesson (John, forthcoming). As children, when we were confused, our elders would say, “You might not understand what I am saying right now, but you will at least recognize it when you should come upon it again.” It was understood that learning was an on-going process and importance was placed on continual preparedness as it is impossible to internalize and apply everything taught. Our elders seem to have an understanding of Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD), which can be described as the distance between potential and actual learning (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). Vygotsky defines ZPD as:

...the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Johnson, 2004, p. 109)

Our elders seem to have an acute sense of when to take our hand to lead us toward understanding. That level of awareness is a skill honed from many years of living. They don't carry instructional books or curriculum guides to say, "Here, learn from these." Rather, they gauge and understand the uniqueness of people. When we learn from our elders, we know that they know what they're talking about. Is it no wonder why some of us 30 year olds, who have only lived a third of our elders' lives, feel uneasy when we are labeled "highly qualified" and "certified" teachers?



### Chapter 5 : Three views of language, culture and identity

There are three possible answers that I've read in the literature on language and identity to the question I ask of this thesis: *Can we remain Yup'ik in these contemporary times?* In one view, language and culture are inextricably linked. To be Yup'ik is to speak Yugtun. May (2005), sees this view as essentialistic, since language and culture are tied together, unchanging and for all time (p. 327). A second, related view holds that we "walk in two worlds". Under this view, English language and culture represent one "world" and Yup'ik language and culture represents the other. People are seen as divided between or moving between these two competing worlds (Henze & Vanett, 1993). The third view holds that language is only one possible marker of identity in a world where "plural, complex and contingent" hybrid identities form from different factors (May, 2005, p. 329).

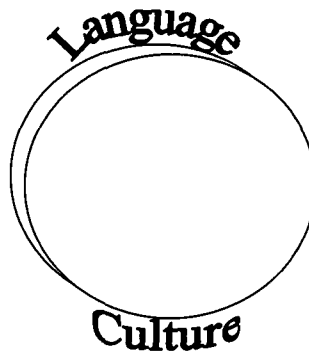
In order to make sense of these different views, it helped to think back to the discussions we had in my SLATE classes. Our professors' asked us to think through the relationship between language and culture. They asked whether language and culture were intertwined or if they could exist separately. To simplify it further, I asked myself two questions: (a) Are you truly Yup'ik if you don't speak Yugtun?; and (b) Can a person claim her/himself Yup'ik through strong emotional beliefs in the traditional values evident through actions, even if s/he can't carry on a meaningful conversation with another Yugtun speaker?

### **Essentialism: Language and culture as one**

My initial answer to the question *Are you truly Yup'ik if you don't speak Yugtun?* was, "No. No, you cannot claim to be Yup'ik if you don't even know the Yugtun language." I thought, language and culture are interconnected and one cannot truly exist without the other. May (2005) describes this view as an example of essentialism:

...[This view] invariably essentialises the languages and groups concerned, fixing them eternally at a particular (usually long-past) point in time when their historically associated language(s) was still widely spoken. (p. 327)

What I saw were two circles blending on top of each other (Figure 1). One represents "language" and the other "culture". In this essentialistic view, language defines culture and culture defines language. We must then ask, how could you be an X-man (Yup'ik) if you don't speak like X-ish (Yugtun) (Fishman, 1991)?



**Figure 1: Language and Culture as One**

Under this view, when I asked *Can we remain Yup'ik in these contemporary (English-laden) times?* I answered "No.". No, we will soon no longer fit this definition because too many people are losing our Yugtun language to English. If to be Yup'ik is to

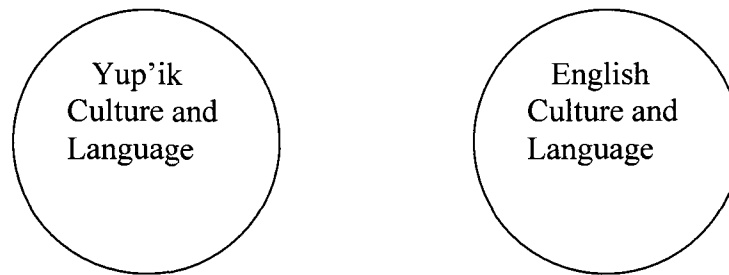
speak Yugtun... If we continue on the same path and do not address our language loss at the school and community level... Then we will cease to be Yup'ik. If we believe that language is holistically a part of culture, then we are moving away from our true identities.

I was uncomfortable with this idea. It did not take into account those people who viewed themselves as Yup'ik but did not speak the Yugtun language. To disregard them and claim them as something else, as non-Yup'ik, did not feel right.

### **Walking in two worlds**

The 'walking in two worlds' metaphor is something we commonly hear in Yup'ik communities. People talk about the need to be successful in an English-speaking world while at the same time holding on to our language and tradition. People who can do this, be successful and accomplish both are said to 'walk in two worlds' (Henze & Vanett, 1993).

What I see when I hear 'the two worlds' metaphor is two circles, or worlds (Figure 2). The English 'world' is one circle and the Yup'ik 'world' is the other. This is different from May's essentialism discussed above, but it still seems to be essentialistic. You are forced to pick one or the other, or if you are lucky, you can move back and forth between them. Many people express this view of language and culture. For instance when Yugtun speakers say, "Don't speak in English, you sound white" (Wyman, 2009, p. 13), they are saying, "Don't do this because you aren't this."



**Figure 2: Walking in Two Worlds**

I understand what the metaphor means. I had heard the phrase many times. At a point in my life, I even claimed to walk in two worlds myself. I was brought up in one world, speaking Yugtun and engaging in seasonal subsistence activities. I was educated in the other (western) world of the school and the university. I remember coming home from the university, and being told, “Uh-oh, maybe she’s ‘white’ now.”

What continually bothered me about “walking in two worlds” was the image of two separate entities that did not seem to fit together. They seemed to work against each other. It was like you were either one or the other. Of course I did not want people to think that I had “turned white” by attending school. Coming home from school with those kinds of comments perpetuated the idea that the two worlds I supposedly occupied really worked against each other. I knew I did not have two personalities, and I knew that my village, Kuiggluk, was on the same planet as Fairbanks, where I attended university. I wondered, what two worlds? What I saw was one world.

When I asked, *Can we remain Yup'ik in these contemporary (English-laden) times?*, I answered, “No.”. If we must choose between worlds, how could we hope to remain Yup'ik in a world so dominated by English? We are surrounded by the English language through the media and print, and in the workplace. It is easy, therefore, to think

English is natural and neutral throughout the world. Fishman (1991) says that speakers of languages like Yugtun “...know that English is symbolic of Anglo-American might, money and life-styles, not all of which may be congenial to their own interests, views or goals” (p. 23). But, knowing about and acting on that knowledge are two different things.

The journey through SLATE taught me that a combination of ‘both worlds’ has shaped who I am today. The university helped me to organize my thoughts and feelings on paper that I was able to see for the very first time that:

We must look at the truths within our forms of knowledge and bring them forward to the modern world while simultaneously working to transform the modern world to create a society more in tune with our traditional values. (Wilson, 2004, p. 75)

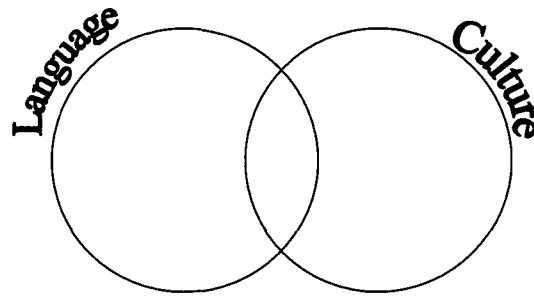
It is difficult to answer the question of whether or not we can remain Yup’ik during these contemporary times because I am fully aware of the shifts that have occurred in my own thinking. To ask the question is to ask, “Who are you?” At first, I believed that language and culture together defined oneself. As I tried my best to be inclusive of all Yup’ik people, I learned that it became harder and harder to define ourselves especially when thinking of people who act like Yup’ik people but who do not speak the Yugtun language. This includes my own son. It then became even more difficult when I thought of my fiancé Dan, an Athabascan Indian but who doesn’t speak the Deg Xinag language, yet he identifies himself as Deg Hit’an. I thought, “How do I think my way around my son and my fiancé?”

### **Hybridity: A mix of language and culture**

May (2005) defines hybridity as,

...entirely opposed to universalism, traditionalism and any idea of ethnic, cultural and, by extension, linguistic rootedness. Rather...it is the 'inter' and 'in-between', the liminal 'third space' of translation, which carries the burden of the meaning(s) of culture in the post-modern, post-colonial world. (p. 326)

May views language and culture as malleable and fluid. They are not cemented into one spot like essentialism. For May, to be Yup'ik did not necessarily mean you had to speak Yugtun. I felt more comfortable with this definition because it meant I could count my son as Yup'ik or Athabascan or both. I envisioned a Venn diagram (see Figure 3) where language and culture are linked together like a chain where they overlap and blend in the middle. In this picture, the entirety of the diagram represents the Yup'ik person. The "culture" part represented the traditional activities we engage in whether they are the seasonal activities of gathering and hunting, or spiritual like the naming of our children. The "language" represents knowledge of the Yugtun language. The middle represents a combination of both meaning one who knows how to speak the Yugtun language and understood the mannerism of being Yup'ik.



**Figure 3: Hybridity**

Hybridity, I thought, offered fluidity and flexibility that neither essentialism nor the two worlds metaphor offered. When I thought of hybridity, I thought of my trip to New Zealand and how the Maori shared their struggles to maintain their language. We saw many Maori who were speaking up for more Maori language schools because the older parents had lost the language themselves. I imagined a man from New Zealand who did not speak the Maori language for whatever reason, but identified himself as Maori because he hunted, fished and still danced the haka. As May (2005) put it, language in this case was "...at most only a contingent factor of one's identity" (p. 327). For May, then, language and culture may be connected, but one does not necessarily define the other, and a person's identity may be defined by a variety of things. Language is only one possibility, and others include hunting, fishing, and dancing the haka. I also thought of our people. Some Yup'ik people in our region do have strong ties to the land through subsistence activities but yet do not speak the language. Who else would dry and smoke salmon to eat all winter, gather and store plants and berries to use as food and medicine? Who else would live in our area if one is not Yup'ik? Baker (2006), quoting May, expressed a similar view:

Our identity is conveyed in our language, in our expressions and engagements, predilections and preferences. Language is a symbol of our identity, conveying our preferred distinctiveness and allegiance (e.g. Irish). However, language itself does not define us. It is one feature or marker amongst many that makes up our constructed, shifting and hybrid identity. (May, 2000, as cited in Baker, 2006, pp. 407-408)

## **Conclusion**

I began this chapter with two questions: (a) Are you truly Yup'ik if you don't speak Yugtun?; and (b) Can a person claim her/himself Yup'ik through strong emotional beliefs in the traditional values evident through actions, even if s/he can't carry on a meaningful conversation with another Yugtun speaker? Many people in the Yukon Kuskokwim (YK) Delta don't speak the Yugtun language, but practice the traditions by hunting, fishing, and gathering. These people call themselves Yup'ik. Hybridity, and its representation of language fluid within culture, allows me to answer both of these questions "Yes.". Yes, one is Yup'ik even if you don't speak Yugtun. Yes, you can claim to be Yup'ik based on strong beliefs and traditional values. Yes, we can remain Yup'ik in these contemporary times. At least, that is what the literature says. But what would the mothers say?



## **Chapter 6 : A Conversation of Three Yugtun-Speaking Mothers**

It is through our three voices as mothers that we tell this particular story. While we understand that it is unique to our experiences, we feel that others might relate to some of the events told. We need to first establish ourselves as the storytellers so that our position is understood in how and why we have come to tell this tale.

### **Right in the middle**

Envision a bridge. On one side is a view of a fish camp along a free-flowing river. There our elders are teaching us how to cut, smoke and preserve the fish. They talk to us about the land and air and ways of respect for all. They teach us about our traditions and our spirituality. Turn your head to the other side of the bridge and the view changes into a university. There we see our professors helping us to grasp abstract ideas and teaching us how to write academic papers. They give guidance to help pass our classes, earn our degrees and find good paying jobs. The mothers who tell this story stand in the middle of the bridge. From this position, we hear, feel and see both sides. This might lead some to believe that we live (and walk) in “two worlds”, the western world and a traditional one (Henze & Vanett, 1993). As Yup’ik women, 39 years of age in the year 2010, we do not live in two worlds. Our respected grandparents live in one and our respected university professors in another. We do not live in two worlds, but they do.

This might be difficult for some to envision. Many see the western and traditional worlds as clashing entities. But it took both to become who we are today. We speak the

English and Yugtun languages and can carry on meaningful conversations in both. We have been educated in both “schools” and know how to express and conduct ourselves in our own communities as well as outside our communities academically and socially. Some might think that being in the middle forces us to choose one from another. This is not so. To be in the middle is more like being in the middle of a discussion where we see and hear both sides and our job is to interpret and understand both points of view.

Understanding that there is difference between the two worlds that have helped shape our lives has allowed us to come closer to understanding language decline. We have been acting/reacting from only one side of the bridge for too long. That is to say, in the process of learning and adopting from the western world, we have neglected to continue our education from the traditional one. Some might wonder, “Was this by our own choosing?”

### **In the midst of decline**

When I began this study, I thought I would initially have to convince the mothers that Yugtun language decline is happening. On the radio, we would hear talk shows engage in discussions of “kids nowadays”, many of whom did not understand the language and were not connecting with themselves. This was seen by the many acts of disrespect to the land (by leaving trash, vandalizing other people’s property) and general impoliteness toward one another. One summer, my parents, younger sister and I were listening to the radio. We listened to elders talk about *yuyaraq*, which is the Yup’ik term loosely meaning “way of life” or “how to be Yup’ik”. (This includes our language, our traditions, how to behave around others, helpfulness, etc.) The message of the

broadcast was for our people to preserve *yuyaraq* by teaching and sharing that knowledge through our language. After listening in for a while, I reminded my sister to use the Yugtun language with her children for fear that we would lose our way of life. She replied, “No, we won’t” after which my parents told her that yes we would, that it was important not to lose the language. Whenever I went home to Kuiggluk from Bethel, I saw that the younger generation of parents (myself included) did not take the language situation seriously enough to push their children, our children, to use it every day. I thought that perhaps Mikngayaq and Qayaruaq (I use our Yugtun names throughout the analysis) were not aware of what I was seeing and hearing. I was relieved to discover that they already knew about the gradual decline of our Yugtun language and had concerns about it as well. Mikngayaq agreed to be part of the study having understood what was happening in Kuiggluk.

### **Mikngayaq**

*I think that maa-i the younger generation mostly tuarr' kass'atun qalaruterpallu[laqait] and I've noticed school-aameng some or a big percentage are having a hard time with the Yup'ik [language]. Speaking-aallrit eliteng'ermeng struggle-aarluteng... tuarr' maa-i parents are talking to their children English-aarpallu[rluteng] carrarmek-llu Yugtun.*

I think that now, the younger generation, it seems talk largely in English and I've noticed since they're in school some or a big percentage are having a hard time with the Yup'ik [language]. Their [way of] speaking [the Yup'ik language], even

though they're learning [it in school, is that] they're struggling...it seems now parents are talking to their children largely in English with a little Yugtun.

We hear many parents in Kuiggluk (and other villages) talking to their children in English, even though the children were immersed in the Yugtun language at school from kindergarten to third grade. She sees also that many times they do not transfer and apply what they've learned at home. She shared how she was trying to use Yugtun at home as a game. She would tell her children in Yugtun "I don't understand what you're saying", when they asked her something in English, as a signal for her children to switch languages. Even though she spoke of "other parents", she is well aware that she herself is struggling to maintain the language at home. This also holds true for myself with my son. He currently attends first grade in Bethel at the Yup'ik immersion school. When he comes home from school, he talks to me in English. When I remind him to use Yugtun, he says, "But we're not in school anymore mom." These examples indicate that our kids see school as the place to use the language, not at home. We have switched positions with our kids. For us, the Yugtun language was spoken at home and the English language at school. Now the Yugtun language is used primarily for school and English at home.

The second mother in the study, Qayaruaq, who is a second grade immersion teacher, also understood that our Yugtun language is declining. She was more than happy to be a part of the study because it gave her a way to share her knowledge. At the time of the study, she was also taking part in community meetings to not only talk about the language issue, but to gather information on traditional knowledge for school use.

She understood that in order to talk about the declining Yugtun language, community members needed to be aware of what was happening. She used her position as co-facilitator of the community meetings to raise this awareness.

### **Qayaruaq**

*...language planning-alria[ni] elitnaurvi[gmi-llu] calituama, atanrem  
aptellruanga...language planning-aqata co-facilitate-aasqellua for our language  
Kuigglugmiu[nun] broaden-aar[na]luku aware-angesqelluki makut puggluki.*

...for language planning [and] because I work at the school, the principal asked me to co-facilitate at the language planning [meeting] for our language [so that we would] broaden the awareness of the people of Kuiggluk by bringing these [issues] up.

Qayaruaq feels that many people do not understand the possibility of losing identity as we continually lose our language. By engaging in community meetings she, as well as the other language planning participants, express these concerns and gather traditional knowledge to teach in the school. Qayaruaq and the other language planners believe a balance of both western concepts and traditional practices are vital for building identity. Teaching only western concepts takes time away from traditional concepts. Others have argued that traditional knowledge is the responsibility of parents and should be taught in the home and not in school. However, this division of labor is no longer entirely practical. Our elders are our images of success. They are the most knowledgeable about our language and our traditions. Yet, they did not spend a lot of

time in school buildings. They lived their lives outside on the tundra, in the trees and on the rivers. Now as children are required by law to attend school, there is hardly any time to develop the traditional knowledge of our elders. Qayaruaq feels we need to counter balance the already heavy load of western concepts taught in our schools today. In doing so, we would send a message to our students that Yugtun language and culture are important. What we need to say is yes, learning the English language and culture will open many other doors to further their education, but the knowledge of the Yugtun language and the Yup'ik culture of themselves and where they come from, will give them the confidence to carry through.

Once we established that we all understood the language situation, our conversations switched to possible explanations of why. Why is our Yugtun language declining at such a rapid rate? What are the conditions that elicit more and more English spoken in Kuiggluk? The answers did not come easy, but over time our discussions started to reveal a broad cause and effect that began with the introduction of outsiders to our community as Qayaruaq reminded us below.

### **Qayaruaq**

*...[be]cause grandparents-aa[mta] tangellruluk struggle-allrat [angayuqait] and tried to make a better life for us [cali-llu be]cause they knew,' Taig'ut Kass'at maanciiqut cimirciqait [yuuciput] ayanqiggngaitut, [nalluvkenateng-llu] we're discovered'.*

*...[be]cause our grandparents saw how they [their own parents] struggled and tried to make a better life for us [ and be]cause they knew,' The white people are*

coming and will stay and change us and never leave, [they knew] we're discovered'.

Our grandparents saw that the “white people” who came to our region brought a different way of life. It was visible through the English language they spoke. The establishment of schools, not welcomed at first, brought what Paulston (1994), refers to as *access* to the new language and an *incentive* to learn it through an improved standard of living (pp. 12-13). Even though we were able to pick our berries and travel to our fish camps using our bear skin boats and our dog teams, our grandparents saw the efficiency advantages of snow machines and motorized boats (as well as guns and other material goods). Acquiring these goods required money and learning the English language. Schools became an important access point for both. I don't believe it was the intent of our grandparents to gradually lose our Yup'ik language as this new way of life emerged.

### **We feel: Responsibility**

Awareness, or lack of awareness in this case, of the declining Yugtun language was one of the topics we were concerned about most. What seemed to determine that distinction was where you went to high school and/or if you had left the village for additional schooling or college. If you left the village for a period of time, you had knowledge of language shift and an understanding of possible language loss. Qayaruaq used herself as an example. When she went away to college she first realized/sensed that some people no longer spoke their heritage language at home. She also realized that language loss was close to home.

### Qayaruaq

*Wangkuta ayakcaarinanemteni elitnauryallruunga...college-aarlua tuall' cali first year[-amni] elpekluku Imangarmiu[m] qalarullu[ku] [Kara-aq]... Wiinga Yugtun qalarulluku tuall' [Kara-q] tangvaurarraarluku [apluni] "Do you understand what she's saying?" ... Tuall' wiinga [Imangarmiu] piluki, "Elpet-mi? Taringuten?" [Tuall' kiuluni] "No. I wish that I could understand and communicate [in my own] language..." Tuani, that's when I first knew.*

*[Be]cause college-aallemteni Eyak-anek qantullruut there was no known speakers at that time...*

As we were moving along [with our lives], I went to school...I went to college and during that first year I realized [that there was] a person from Emmonak talking to [Kara]. I was talking to [Kara] in Yup'ik and this person from Emmonak was watching us. Then she asked [Kara] "Do you understand what she is saying?" Then I asked [the person from Emmonak], "How about you? Do you understand?" And then she replied, "No, I wish I could understand and communicate [in my own] language." That's when I first knew.

[Be]cause they [professors] spoke of the Eyak language and how today there are no known speakers of the language...

Qayaruaq saw that there were people who couldn't speak their heritage languages who still wished they could. She also spoke of another language group, the Eyak



speakers of southern Alaska, who were losing their language rapidly. Knowing that language shift can lead to language death is deeply threatening and something we agreed everyone should be aware of. Qayaruaq spoke further to say that those who had left the village were more aware of language shift:

**Qayaruaq**

*Tuall' tamaani wangkuta graduate-allemteni...aware-a[ang]llemteni, makut, ...mikelnguput qeqertaqameng-llu kass'atun qanllagangaqluteng. Maaken ayallret...murilkekuvet irniarit Yugtun puqinruut because wangkuta ayagallerni elpekellruaput language-aaput shift-atullinilria tamatullinilria.*

*Tua-llu ayaksailnguut [maaken] makut, kass'atun [kiingan qalartelleq...] they think it's more important for their kids to speak and comprehend the English language more than they [their own parents] can.*

And then when we graduated and became aware [of our surroundings]...we noticed the kids after us when they got mad, they would blurt out their anger in English. The people who have left here...if you observe their children they are stronger Yugtun speakers because those of us that would leave and came back, we are realizing our language has shifted and that was what it was.

And then those that haven't left, think [the] English [language] is more important for their kids to speak and comprehend more advanced than the parents had before.

Qayaruaq explained that a lot of children today express their anger in English. Emotions such as anger reveal what is inside and to express them in English shows an element of shift from Yugtun to English. Some parents of school children understand that language can shift because they've left the village and seen it for themselves. Those who stayed in the village, those who have not seen language shift for themselves, have simply accepted the message of the school (and the media). For them, learning English is more important.

For the mothers, our traditional teachings provide an important foundation for self-confidence and self-assuredness (Reyhner & Tennant, 1995). If we are to ensure the success of our children (not just the success of a good paying job), we need to teach the values of our traditions to raise a strong Yup'ik person. Because focus is largely on learning English to pass the High School Qualifying Exams (HSQE) in the school, Qayaryuaq channels her energy toward teaching the language and culture.

### **Qayaruaq**

*... They [teachers] prepare them [to go] outside to go [on] to higher education whether it [s] ... a training school, job corps, they've succeeded in getting them ready to succeed in the outside world. Wiinga taumek pilartua nunam pianek, one time kiingan pillruanka, even if they succeed in the white man's world I want them [students] to succeed and survive in the wilderness... using the food that we can eat. It won't matter if they have a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree... but [if] they cannot survive in this area, I won't consider them ready for the outside world. I have them ready in both worlds and that's what I believe in.*

*...And that's hard to teach, icugg' tuaten pilleq [elitnaurilleq yuuyaramtenek] caperrnarquq.*

... They [teachers] prepare them [to go] outside to go [on]to higher education whether it['s]...a training school, job corps, they've succeeded in getting them ready to succeed in the outside world. That's why I teach about the land, one time I told them, even if they succeed in the white man's world I want them [students] to succeed and survive in the wilderness...using the food that we can eat. It won't matter if they have a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree...but [if] they cannot survive in this area, I won't consider them ready for the outside world. I have them ready in both worlds and that's what I believe in. ...And that's hard to teach, you know, doing that [teaching about our culture] is difficult.

Qayaruaq believes that success and understanding oneself, require knowledge of our culture. She feels the land itself teaches us who we are. To guide students to come to that kind of understanding is difficult, especially when English appears to dominate all the subjects in school. Her claim that degrees and diplomas “won't matter” reveals the level of her frustrations. What is really meant is, “Enough is enough about English, English, English!” Her definition of “success” really is different from that of the English teachers. Hers can be a lonely position to defend. Watching students “graduate” from school having only learned English can be heartbreaking. When we watch them leave our school buildings not yet having established ourselves as “real teachers” in their eyes is one of the frustrations of being in the middle.

### **We hear: A different “Yup’ik” person**

As mothers in the middle, we can see where we have gone and the steps we need to take on our path. We’ve migrated toward learning the English language and culture for so long, that we’re now hearing a different version of what it means to be a “Yup’ik” person today. Qayaruaq talked to a former high school graduate about this issue (as she does with any student willing to talk about our language and culture). This is her conversation with the student (labeled S) and his version of “Yup’ik”.

#### **Qayaruaq**

*S: “I don’t have to speak the language to be a Yuk.”*

*Tuaten pillruanga tuall’ waten piluku,*

*Q: “Qaillun? Tell me more, please tell me more.”*

*S: “I don’t need to speak my language ‘cause I’m a Yuk.”*

*Q: “Qaillun Yug’usit? Yuk? What’s a Yuk?”*

*Tuall’ uitaarraarluni [qanerluni],*

*S: “I know how to hunt.”*

*S: “I don’t have to speak the language to be a Yuk.”*

*That’s what he told me then I told him,*

*Q: “How? Tell me more, please tell me more.”*

*S: “I don’t need to speak my language ‘cause I’m a Yuk.”*

*Q: “How are you Yup’ik? Yuk? What’s a Yuk?”*

*And then he thought for a while [and said],*

*S: “I know how to hunt.”*

The conversation continued where Qayaruaq asked the student what he would do if he ran across a person who did not speak the English language to which he replied that he would say, “I’m sorry I don’t understand.” Then she asked what he would do if an elder spoke to him. He said he would motion his words to the elder. The student then used the bible for his defense and said that it did not say anything about having to use the Yugtun language! Qayaruaq then told him to read the story of the Tower of Babel. The next day the student came back and said he read the story. Qayaruaq then asked, “What did God give us?” He replied, “He gave everybody a different language. And that’s when they separated.” Qayaruaq said, “See, God gave us that language, we should take pride in what God gave [us]. It’s also in the bible.”

Clearly the student hadn’t learned (till later on) that to be “Yuk” is to listen and to not argue with someone older than you. Nowhere in our teachings does it say for us to prove our point to our elders, to talk back to them, to challenge them. To be Yup’ik is to respect your elders. That is, to know when to speak, and in what manner with whom. After this incident the student accepted her as a teacher and was more respectful. He now speaks to her in Yugtun whenever he sees her.

Like this student, when I was in high school I sometimes denied I could speak Yugtun. McCarty, Romero and Zepeda (2006) found similar behaviors among some Navajo students who tried to hide their knowledge of Navajo from their peers, to make them believe they did not know the language because they were ashamed. During that confusing time in high school, I did not want to use Yugtun because I thought knowing it wouldn’t matter when I went off to school. Little did I know that knowing the language,

and our teachings connected to it, would bring me further in my education, and closer to who I am. I am certain that the student Qayaruaq spoke with also gained a deeper understanding that within our language lie our teachings.

### **We hear: Improper forms of language**

Every year we hear more and more children use English and less Yugtun. As a result, our own children are becoming alienated from the language. As Mikngayaq explained her own child thinks speaking Yugtun sounds “weird”.

#### **Mikngayaq**

*Yah, [Mik’aq] maa-i naspaaqalartuq [a] few words and then he’ll start laughing.*

*Icugg’ [qanerluni] “...how weird it sounds.” coming out of him.*

Yah, [Mik’aq] now he tries [a] few words and then he’ll start laughing. You know, [saying] “...how weird it sounds.” coming out of him.

Not speaking the language leads to improper forms of Yugtun (and English). In another conversation a mother (not in the study) explained how she did not want to use the Yugtun language because she would be made fun of not knowing how to say certain words. It becomes a belittling experience. Instead, she would try to talk to her grandmother by constantly asking, “How do you say this, how do you say that?” It is understandable to try not to be laughed at, but how else are we going to learn if we don’t make mistakes trying?

It took a short period of time for language shift to take hold in Kuiggluk. What we are starting to hear from our children are isolated, simplified versions of Yugtun.

Again Qayaruaq mentions that is because many of the parents today haven't left the village. They haven't seen language shift first hand and so they use improper forms of Yugtun (and English) to their own children.

### **Qayaruaq**

*Makut-llu cali...makut irniarit maa-i ayaningaartut elementary-mi uitalriit tuall'-qaa tamakut cali kass'atun pingiinaarluteng Yugtun taugaam qanllagaqluteng piluteng tuall-qaa from where we were at eighty-eight-aami graduate-allret to ninety-eight-aami graduate-allret...ayagaksaunateng maanqurallret tamakut wani irniarit elementary-mlluteng waten qantuluteng, "Go house-amun. Go put paltuuk on."*

Then these...these children today are starting to go to elementary school and are starting to learn more English speaking a little Yugtun periodically and then from where we were at [from the year] eighty-eight who've graduated to ninety-eight graduates...[the parents] haven't left, they've stayed here and their children who are in elementary school say "Go to house. Go put coat on."

These are the kinds of expressions we are hearing from younger parents as Qayaruaq mentions above. Our Yugtun language is becoming more and more simplified. It all becomes broken and loses its flow and meaning. In effect, they do not get the essence of our language.

### **What our senses and worlds tell us**

While going through the transcripts of our conversations, I noticed two concepts coming back again and again. These concepts are represented by two verb prefixes, *elpeg-* or ‘sense’ and *ella-* or ‘awareness’. These verb prefixes represent emotionally rooted concepts in the Yugtun language (W. Charles, personal communication, December 17, 2009). That is they are attached to our physical, mental and spiritual selves as Yup’ik people.

Because they represent deeply respected concepts deeply rooted in our epistemology (see Chapter 4) they are not casually talked about, and would be more properly explained by our elders. I understand that I am not an elder. Being in the middle, I have my limitations and at the time of this writing, I feel a little uneasy. But what is foremost is the dire state of language loss that will eventually lead to language death if no action is taken. As I continue, I pray for guidance and for forgiveness for my blunders. This is one of the challenges of being in the middle; to make sure what is shared is proper and respectful.

The first verb prefix *elpeg-* ‘sense’ which occurred in 20 words in our discussions (see Table 1), is loosely translated as, “to sense or realize from within (one)self”. Take for example the first word *elpengkata* “when they acquire sensation.” Qayaruaq used this word in the phrase, ...*elpengkata makut elitnaurat...* meaning “when these students acquire sensation/ realization”. Not only did she mean for her students to physically acquire sensation through the five senses, but mentally by awakening the thoughts processed around it. The concept of *elpeg-* ‘sense’ is also spiritual. As Yup’ik people,



we believe we don't exist by ourselves as ourselves even within our own bodies. We each hold an individual relationship with our creative force. When we are given sensation, we prove ourselves worthy to accept that experience by the pleasing and positive thoughts we process and by the pleasing and positive actions we take.

Experiences are earned. Only our creative force understands us this way. When we are given sensation we must follow through with gratitude and humility. When we are not grateful and/or humble, we block forthcoming sensations, which are needed to continue to grow mentally and spiritually.

**Table 1: *Elpeq*- Examples**

<b>Elpeg- Words</b>	<b>Loose definition</b>
Elpengkata	When they acquire sensation
Elpengqerraallemni	When I first came to my senses
Elpekluku	When I sensed it
Elpengqerrsaaut	They have senses but...
Elpegimaut	They're in the state of absence of sense
Elpengumaut	They're in the state with the presence of sense
Elpenggesqessaaqluku	In the hope that he has senses
Elpekellruaput	We sensed it
Elpekumallruapuk	We (2) had already sensed it for a period of time
Elpengqertut	They have senses
Elpeng'ut	They've acquired sense
Elpengevkarluki	Allowing them to acquire sense
Elpegil[n]guut	Ones without sense
Elpengyaaqut	They have acquired sense, but...
Elpengciqaat	They will come to their senses
Elpengumaamta	Because we are in the state of having acquired sense
Elpengllemni	When I acquired sense
Elpengqerraallratni	When they first acquired sense
Elpekciqaat	They will sense it
Elpengunrilnguut	Ones who haven't acquired sense

The second verb prefix *ella-* ‘awareness’ occurred in 7 words in our discussions (see Table 2). It is roughly translated as “awareness from within oneself to the outside of self”. Take for example the first word in the table below, *ellangukut* “we’ve acquired awareness”. We (Qayaruaq, Mikngayaq and Atan) used this word to indicate that we understood language loss and why we were engaged in this study. To have *ella-* ‘awareness’ is to consciously know you have it. This awareness may be discussed with others, remembered and continued later on. To not have *ella* is to be oblivious to, or unconscious of, what is happening around us and why.

**Table 2: *Ella-* Examples**

<b>Ella- Words</b>	<b>Loose Definition</b>
Ellangukut	We’ve acquired awareness
Ellang’ut	They have awareness
Ellangeksaunateng	Having not acquired awareness
Ellangnariamta	Because it’s time for us to acquire awareness
Ellangeksaitua	I haven’t become aware
Ellangnaqlua	When I attempted to become aware
Ellangyaqlirlua	Finally becoming aware (self)

For comparison, consider the words *elpengllemni*, “when I acquired sense” and *ellangellemni* “when I acquired awareness”. *Elpengllemni* is experience gained using the senses. *Ellangllemni* is understanding gained through attention to the world around us.

In looking at the two lists above, we talked about the *elpeg-*‘sense’ more than *ella-*‘awareness’. When trying to understand language loss, we seem to be first looking at it from a personal experiential point of view. All the words in the first table refer to sense and sensing as we are beginning to figure out the problem as we hear, feel and see the decline of our Yugtun language. As we hear more English and less Yugtun from our

children, as we hear improper forms of each language, we feel frustrated because we see many who have not yet realized the importance of continuing to learn our language as part of mental and spiritual growth.

Only after we experience language loss, are we able to truly understand it. The *ella-* words in the second table refer to the internalized understanding and knowledge of what we initially sensed (heard, saw, felt) as true. The emotions that the words carry are spiritual. As stated earlier, we are given awareness by our creative force when we are ready to act upon them. We are awakened to see what is happening around us and in doing so must take action and share our knowledge so that others too become aware of what we see.

We feel the responsibility to spread awareness, which becomes both a burden and a thrilling task to undertake. In all that we see, hear and feel, we see possibilities of change. As Qayaruaq said when I asked if it was too much, if trying to maintain our Yugtun language situation was becoming a losing battle:

**Qayaruaq**

*“ ...I don’t think it’s a losing battle. It’s just that ellangukut. Wangkuta ellangnariamta ellangukut...”*

“ ...I don’t think it’s a losing battle. It’s just that we’ve acquired awareness. Because it’s time for us to acquire awareness we’ve acquired awareness...”

## Conclusion

Now is the time for us to take action to maintain our language. We have gained deeper awareness and proven ourselves worthy through our pleasing and positive thoughts and actions. It is our hope that others will follow. Many people will nod their heads and agree that our language is declining, but they have not yet internalized this fact to the point where they themselves move toward change and maintenance.

All these headings that were derived from the themes of realization, awareness, generations, decline of language all have to do with differing/changing views of our language and culture. These are all the changes that we see, hear and feel just as though we are the windowpane in between two generations. Out of all the themes we've covered, we personally feel that awareness is most important. We feel we cannot work alone and need other community members to raise awareness. It *is* a community issue, and not just for the language teachers in our schools and not just for the mothers of children. I believe as I speak for the mothers that if we do address the themes we've discussed through what we see, hear and feel, then yes, we can remain Yup'ik and maintain a strong identity through our language and culture for our children and to those after.

## **Chapter 7 : Can We Remain Yup'ik in These Contemporary Times?**

Many people believe, as I once did, that the “two worlds” of traditional and modern are completely separate and work against each other. As a result, you have to choose one or the other. The idea that the two could merge together to form a hybrid world and a hybrid identity came as I was writing this thesis. Writing the thesis forced me to look at the many times I was asked during my participation in SLATE to be myself. In fact, I was specifically told to keep in mind my ancestors as I wrote to make sure that what I said was true and real. No other university professor ever asked me to do that. In this journey, I’ve learned that I am not less Yup’ik, as some might view, for leaving family and children to go to school. Instead I have, we have, become much more. I believe my grandfather already knew that all along the day he gently sat down beside me and smiled off into the distance.

In order for me to try to answer the question *Can we remain Yup'ik in these contemporary times?*, I reflected back again to our classroom discussions about the relationship between language and culture. Our professors asked, “Are language and culture intertwined, or can we have one without the other?” I remember they divided the class into two groups. Each group was asked to defend one side of the argument, whether or not they believed it. I was chosen to defend the idea that you can have culture without the language. At the time, I truly believed that the two could not be separated and so used every imaginable excuse to defend my position while at the same time not believing what I said. My only mission was to win the debate. I don’t even remember what I said because it felt like I was wearing a mask to hide my true feelings.

My conviction that language and culture were inseparable grew when we read Lev Vygotsky's ideas about language acquisition. While Piaget and others have suggested that we learn language by tapping into what is already coded within us, Vygotsky explained that language is built upon our interactions with others in our community (Vygotsky, 1986, as cited in Johnson, 2004, p. 116). Johnson explained Vygotsky's views in a way that was strangely familiar to me. She used the word *green* as an example. One meaning of the word is "fixed" or neutral such as the color *green*. I understood this as a straightforward dictionary definition. With her second meaning, I felt a connection when she explained that words also have a "psychological association", or emotional feeling like the definition of green as in the "*green party*" (Johnson, 2004, pp. 114-115). I was excited. The Yugtun language evokes feelings that create for me a deeper sense of what it means to be "Yup'ik". Speaking Yugtun is more than just being able to pronounce the words. Speaking the language is inclusive of what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. Speaking Yugtun involves knowing and understanding Yup'ik cultural norms.

One day I caught my grandfather singing. I remember he was lying sideways on his bed playing solitaire as he usually did right before dinnertime and a song slipped out of his mouth. I must have gasped loudly because I caught him off guard and he stopped. I asked him what he sang and instantly he got up, mumbled something about forgetting to do something and walked off leaving his cards as they were on the bed. As I read Vygotsky I cried because I thought of that exchange between my grandfather and me. In my family, we never talked about Yup'ik dance. It had been banished by missionaries

years before and I can only assume that my grandfather knew how to sing (and dance) from his parents. The only dancing I ever knew was on TV for entertainment. Later I learned that our traditional dancing was spiritual and to beat the drum was to awaken the ancestors. It was a form of prayer before Christianity came and took our dances away. The tears I shed as I read about Vygotsky's work were tears of anger and sorrow. I was angry that my grandfather did not feel free to share his wonderful experience of dance and I felt sorry for him as I imagined his feelings packed so tight that a song escaped without any thought. More and more I felt that there was no other way in which to define ourselves unless we spoke and sang and danced the language.

Another article that influenced my views about language and identity was from King (1999). She spoke of the indigenous Saraguros who speak the Quichua language of southwestern Ecuador. King writes,

Saraguro language ideology, then, consists not only of valuing the language for specific functions and the emotional connections that the language provides, but also of a conscious and often well-articulated awareness of the symbolic importance of the language. (p. 16)

What that said to me was that language was important. As Yugtun speakers, when we are asked to translate into English, the powerful nature of the words is lost in the explanations. I thought, when I don't use the language with my own children, I am not providing a vital aspect of who we are. How are they to define themselves when they don't even understand their own language?

The way I understood our language was much the same way that other Indigenous groups view their own. It is spiritual in nature. McCarty, Romero and Zepeda (2006) spoke of many indigenous people to illustrate this point. For instance, the Yaqui language is seen as a gift from the creator of the people and therefore is to be respected. Others view their languages as living entities that should be nurtured and cared for, just as we nurture and care for each other as human beings (p. 29). The more I read, the more difficult it became for me to separate language from culture because in my mind they acted and moved as one body. Language and culture defined an essentialistic relationship. In order to be Yup'ik, you had to speak Yugtun. How could one claim his Yup'ikness if he did not speak the very language that defines what it is to be Yup'ik?

*Then came the questions I had about my own son and my thinking began to shift.*

As I discussed in Chapter 5, my son's first language is English. I took a year off from teaching to be with my son and spoke to him in our Yugtun language. There was no question in my mind that he was Yup'ik and that he, like his father, was Athabascan. Who else is he going to be if he isn't biologically my own and Dan's? After he was two years old, I went back to work and he went to daycare with an Albanian-speaking woman. When he was three, we enrolled him in an English pre-school program. The little Yugtun he spoke at home was no longer heard. He spoke entirely in English unless I specifically asked him to use Yugtun, which was not very often.

As I fought my way through defining myself, I had no choice but to think of him also. If I claim that in order to be Yup'ik you must speak Yugtun, then who is my son? He no longer spoke Yugtun. What little he had known wasn't developed, he couldn't



carry on a conversation in Yugtun, so who can I say he is? My thoughts also went back to Dan and to his claim to being Athabascan. He didn't speak his ancestral language, Deg Xinag either. He hunted birds and moose for us each season. We went fishing, and cut and dried fish for the winter. He understood the balance we have to preserve with nature, the respect we have to pay to our land. He understood the reasons why we gave our first catch to our elders and why he encouraged our son not to talk casually of "going hunting" because he knew the animals were listening. Every year we gave back our moose bones in the river as we prayed for another good hunt. He knew all this because of his upbringing, but yet did not speak his language. Who is he then according to my claims of being "Yup'ik"? What makes Dan "Athabascan" when he can't speak his language? By my former definition, both my son and fiancé became not who I thought they were. I thought, "How could that be?"

Again, my thoughts went back to the question we were posed by our instructors, can we have culture without language, or are they inseparable? The more I read, the more I thought, the more I discussed, the more questions I had. When I read May's (2005) discussion of hybridity, it felt as though my son and Dan were more holistically defined. Language is only one marker of identity. I felt a little better. As I said earlier, when I thought of identity, I did not want to exclude anyone. I thought the more people I included in the definition of Yup'ik, the better we would be able to deal with language decline as a whole. If I still maintained that language and culture exist as one and are inseparable, then we exclude those who can't speak the language. How could we do that when a lot of Ayaprun Elitnaurvik parents, parents who have enrolled their children in an

immersion school, don't speak the language? Do we only include the students who are learning the language as "Yup'ik" and not their parents? And how about those students who are of Irish or German decent whose parents enroll them in our schools? They speak the language, but rarely engage in subsistence activities or don't live year round in Bethel. Are they Yup'ik too?

When I talked to Qayaruaq and Mikngayaq, I expected we would have similar views about the relationship between language and culture. After all, we grew up together. We are all the same age, and we all have school-aged children. Like me, when I started this research, Qayaruaq was certain that language and culture together defined identity and that we couldn't truly be Yup'ik without both the Yugtun language and the Yup'ik culture. I understand her point of view and respect her sense of conviction and strength. I felt her powerful words as we discussed our language, our culture and our desire for everyone else in the village to share her conviction and strength. And honestly, I secretly wish that I could again be as certain as she is.

Mikngayaq, like me, felt uncertain. Unlike Qayaruaq, we both have non-Yugtun speaking partners. I think this adds to our difficulty. It is difficult to use the language all the time in a household where you are the only speaker. It is difficult to raise children to be Yugtun speakers when only one parent speaks it. I understand that some families do just fine with a one-parent one-language model (Li, 1999), yet both Mikngayaq and I struggle. Does this make our children less Yup'ik than Qayaruaq's children?

To be Yup'ik is to be accepting of others' views even though they might not be your own. We allow others to speak their minds because we all experience our own

lives, our own thoughts, and our own struggles. I am not in the position to say who is right or who is wrong. I agree with Qayaruaq and Mikngayaq that we must acknowledge our language decline, and endeavor to strengthen and to pass on our understanding of our Yup'ik epistemology. We must acknowledge what we have learned and endeavor to spread our newfound awareness. If we accept and understand these common goals and responsibilities, if we come together with a single voice then we will be better able to improve the state of our language, culture and community. As an individual though, my shifting and sometimes conflicted thoughts about how we define ourselves are my own.

I knew writing my thesis was going to be challenging, but what I did not take into account was the time it took to process all the information I had learned. I expected to instantly learn the material that was presented to me because after all, I am a college graduate and a teacher. I can see how my understanding has grown over the past three years, but I am still working and re-working over my definitions of identity from an essentialistic viewpoint toward a more fluid hybridity but I am not ready to settle on a single viewpoint or definition. For now, I am leaving my definitions open for more insights. It's easy to read what others think about the relationship between identity language and culture, but it takes time to fully internalize others' thoughts and to formulate one's own. Elders have often told me, "You might not understand what I'm talking about now, but if you should come across them again..." For now I will tell myself to do just that. I don't have to know all the answers right now, because it's not time. In the meantime, I can use what I already know.

*Can we remain Yup'ik in these contemporary times?* I believe for right now yes, we can remain Yup'ik if we make conscious efforts to understand where we are and where we want to go.

I was reminded of the Yup'ik situation when I read Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo's (1999) reference to "returnees", or Kwara'ae people who physically went back to their communities to re-connect to their culture and language (p. 33). As Yup'ik people, we can not go back to our "homelands" to reconnect with our language or culture because we live here. This is where we stand and speak from. Fishman referred to this as "great dislocation" (Fishman, 1991, as cited in Henze & Vanett, 1993; Fishman, 1991). That is, our traditional teachings and knowledge that help define us might be lost forever if we don't take the time to address our current language situation. But unlike the indigenous Kwara'ae, regaining our 'significant core' can't be done simply by moving back home. We will need more aggressive ways because we have no place to go.

When I first become a mother, my own mother advised me to take all the positive experiences of my upbringing and to apply them to my own children and leave the not so positive behind. In order to move forward, we must carry with us the good that we have learned from the stories of the past and continue them on by telling our children. As adults, that is our responsibility. As one of the mothers shared with me early on in the study, this "research" has to be done. We have to let others know what is happening to our language. We have to develop guidelines for others to use and follow. Yup'ik people say, *Ciunerkaq nalluaput*, "We don't know the future." When this phrase is said, those listening know to move with caution. We don't know what the future holds for our

children, and we must move with caution as we try to create a path forward, toward remaining Yup'ik in these contemporary times.

It is my hope, in my attempt to follow in the footsteps of my grandparents, that I have told a good enough story.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Adult Consent Form**

#### Exploration of Two Yugtun Speaking Mothers

##### **Description of the Study:**

You are being asked to take part in a study about Yugtun language use. The goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of what it means to be a Yugtun person. You are being asked to take part in this study because you are a Yugtun first language mother and have graduated with me (Veronica Michael) from Kuiggluk School.

If you decide to be a part of this study you will be involved in group discussions about your own language history and the way in which you use Yugtun at home and in the community. If it is OK with you, I would like to tape record our conversations.

You will be given a chance to review notes and transcripts of our conversations to guarantee accuracy. I will provide written work (papers, articles, thesis chapters) for review and comment before publication.

##### **Risks and Benefits in the Study:**

If any of my questions are too personal or upsetting in any way, you should not answer. Please feel free to redirect our discussion at any time. You may stop participating in the study at anytime. There is no penalty for withdrawing from the study.

##### **Confidentiality:**

The data derived from this study could be used in reports, presentations, and publications. You may choose either to be identified by name in all publications or to keep your name confidential. If you choose to withhold your name, neither you nor your family will be individually identified. Your name, the name of your child, and relatives will NOT be used in anything I write. Pseudonyms will be used in everything I write.

##### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your decision to take part in the study is voluntary. You are free not to take part in the study or to stop taking part at any time with any penalty.

##### **Contacts and Questions:**

If you have questions now, feel free to ask me. If you have questions later, you may contact me or my advisor, Patrick Marlow.

Atan Michael	Patrick Marlow
907-543-0698	907-474-7446
<a href="mailto:fsvem@uaf.edu">fsvem@uaf.edu</a>	<a href="mailto:ffpem@uaf.edu">ffpem@uaf.edu</a>

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Research Coordinator in the Office of Research Integrity at 474-7800 (Fairbanks area) or 1-866-7800 (outside the Fairbanks area) or [fyirb@uaf.edu](mailto:fyirb@uaf.edu).

**Statement of Informed Consent:**

I, (name) \_\_\_\_\_, have read and discussed the guidelines for the *Exploration of two Yugtun speaking mothers* research project and I agree to participate. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can quit at any time. I will not receive pay for my participation. **I want the following level of access to my name in this research:**

☐ I wish my name to be kept confidential, to the extent possible under this research project. My name will NOT be used in any publications or presentations, and all efforts will be made to protect my identity in association with this research.

☐ My name can be associated with the research. I understand that my name, home community, and other information may be used in publications or presentations. I know that I can change my involvement to *confidential* at any time by requesting to fill out a new consent form.

Name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address \_\_\_\_\_

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☐ ***Please check here if you have received a copy of this consent form to bring home.***

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2

### Initial Focus Group Discussion

#### Exploration of two Yugtun speaking mothers

I want to thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. We've already gone over the informed consent form. I want to take just a minute to see if you have any questions for me. As I explained before, I am researching how Yugtun is used at home. And I wanted to talk to you because we graduated in the same year from high school and we're both mothers.

Before we get started, I just want to remind you that your participation is completely voluntary. You can quit at any time. If you quit, the tapes and transcripts from our conversations will be destroyed.

If you are ready...it is OK for me to start the tape recorder?

Today I just want you to tell me some stories of growing up with the Yugtun and English languages and how you use Yup'ik and English today especially around your children.

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*The following are a list of topics that will be used to guide the group discussion:*

#### PERSONAL HISTORY

Did you spend a lot of time doing subsistence? What language do you remember your parents speaking? Did they know much English? Do you remember when you first started to speak English? What was that like? Tell me about your schooling?

#### PERSONAL VIEW OF LANGUAGE SITUATION

In your opinion, how would you describe the language situation in Kuiggluk? In the region? How would you describe the importance of English/Yup'ik today? For our kids? For our community? For us as adults? What are your thoughts on the possibility of losing Yugtun altogether?

#### CHILDREN/LANGUAGE USE

When do you most use the Yugtun/English with your child? What (if anything) do you think drives that language choice? What make you think so? Who in your family uses more Yugtun with the children? Who do the children use Yugtun with more? What drives these choices? What make you think so?

#### LANGUAGE/CULTURE

Do you think the two are interconnected? Why/why not?

What does it mean to have a language? What does it mean to have a culture?

#### BEFORE NEXT MEETING

Are there any topics you want to discuss the next time we get together again? What other topics do you want to discuss further next time?